

Shultz Memoirs Say Bush Misstated Arms-for-Hostages Deal

1/31/93

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

Former president George Bush misrepresented his role and knowledge of the arms-for-hostages dealings with Iran in 1985 and 1986, according to memoirs by former secretary of state George P. Shultz.

In an excerpt from the memoirs appearing in Time magazine this week, Shultz describes a tense en-

counter with Bush on Nov. 9, 1986, six days after a Beirut magazine first disclosed the secret arms-for-hostages deals:

"I put my views to him [Bush]: I didn't know much about what had actually transpired, but I knew that an exchange of arms for hostages had been tried on at least one occasion. Bush admonished me, asking emphatically whether I realized there were major strategic objectives being pur-

sued with Iran. He said he was very careful about what he said.

"'You can't be technically right; you have to be right,' I responded. I reminded him that he had been present at a meeting where arms for Iran and hostage releases had been proposed and that he had made no objection, despite the opposition of both Cap [then-Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger] and me. 'That's where you are,' I said. There was considerable tension between us when we parted."

The day before that meeting, Bush, Shultz writes, he told old friend Nicholas F. Brady he was concerned that the then-president "could get drawn into lies" over the secret arms-for-hostages deal. Shultz told Brady he was concerned that Bush's public statement about the deal "blows his nose" and that if Bush "blows his nose," he's finished.

Shultz adds in the memoirs: "See SHULTZ, A16,

■ *A look at the issue of Bush and the Iran-contra scandal.* Page C6

Shultz: Bush Misstated Role On Iran Deals

SHULTZ, From A1

he was "astonished" to read an interview Bush gave to The Washington Post nine months later in which Bush said he had never heard Shultz or Weinberger express their strong opposition to the arms sales—that he was "not in the loop." According to Shultz, "Cap called me. He was astonished too. That's terrible [Weinberger said]. He [Bush] was on the other side. It's on the record. Why did he say that?"

Shultz's new disclosure, part of memoirs to be published this spring, confirms and amplifies a contemporaneous Weinberger note released four days before last November's presidential election. The note contained Weinberger's expression of amazement at Bush's disclaimer of any knowledge of Shultz's and Weinberger's opposition to arms sales.

Release of that Weinberger note as part of an additional indictment of the former defense secretary brought by Iran-contra independent counsel Laurence E. Walsh raised questions about Bush's credibility and led Republicans to claim that Walsh had tried to influence the election. On Christmas Eve, then-President Bush pardoned Weinberger and five other men implicated in the Iran-contra scandal, which also involved the diversion of profits from the sales to Iran for the benefit of contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Shultz realized that his version of events contradicted Bush's oft-repeated public statements on his Iran-contra role, according to sources familiar with Shultz's thinking. The former secretary of state resisted suggestions that he publish



BY JAMES M. THRESHER—THE WASHINGTON POST

George P. Shultz at 1987 news conference. He rejected pre-election publication.

these excerpts from his memoirs before the November election, the sources said.

Shultz's memoirs provide a number of new disclosures on the Iran-contra affair. A month after the Iran-contra firestorm had erupted and Reagan had said publicly he had no plans to send more arms to Iran, Reagan—with support from Bush, then-CIA Director William J. Casey and others—was still trying to close an arms-for-hostage deal with the Tehran regime “just as though nothing had happened,” Shultz writes.

Shultz describes several attempts he made to get Reagan to halt the operation but says he never really could get through to the president and repeatedly had the feeling that his views were being dismissed or ignored. The operation only ended, Shultz writes, when Casey was hospitalized with a brain tumor on Dec. 16, 1986.

Casey, according to Shultz, was “clearly” the driving force in this “catastrophic effort.” The “zeal went out of the operation when [Casey] left the CIA,” Shultz says. “It was as though a festering boil had been lanced.”

Shultz provides an unflattering picture of a stubborn Reagan who doggedly convinced himself he was not trading arms for hostages. “To him reality was different,” Shultz writes.

On the Iranian arms sale and other issues . . . [Reagan] would

go over the ‘script’ of an event, past or present, in his mind, and once that script was mastered, that was the truth—no fact, no argument, no plea for reconsideration could change his mind.”

Shultz describes Weinberger as opposed to the arms sale but willing to go along with efforts to hide what had occurred once the scandal became public. For example, Shultz writes, Weinberger signed on to a draft White House press release that said Reagan’s advisers had given “unanimous support for the president’s decision” to sell arms to Iran, even though Weinberger and Shultz had emphatically opposed those sales.

Shultz describes how he eventually made then-national security adviser John M. Poindexter rewrite the release so it said only that there was “unanimous support for the president.” Shultz said he did not object to that statement, but told Poindexter, “I am very uncomfortable with it.” According to Shultz, Poindexter replied, “That is most unfortunate,” and hung up.

Shultz’s recollections appear to support a theory of Iran-contra prosecutors who believe that White House meetings of key Reagan aides in late November 1986 were designed to produce a cover story to hide Reagan’s approval of a November 1985 arms-for-hostage shipment to Iran. Attorney General Edwin Meese III feared that the shipment was illegal.

According to Shultz, Reagan told him on Nov. 20, 1986, that he knew about the 1985 arms shipment. Just one day later, Shultz writes, Meese told him that Reagan did not know about the shipment.

Shultz quotes Meese telling him “if it happened and the president didn’t report it, it’s a violation” of the law.

“I hear what you are saying,” Shultz said he replied to Meese, “but I would not want to be the president arguing it in public.”

Shultz described a Nov. 24, 1986, National Security Council meeting as “perplexing as it was peculiar.” It had been called so that Meese could present what he had learned about the November 1985 shipment of arms to Iran. But, according to Shultz, “Meese said almost nothing while Poindexter took charge, reviewing the Iran operation just as if no objections had ever been raised.” When Shultz objected

to what was going on, he was ignored and says that Reagan “was in a steamy, angry mood clearly directed at me—which sent an unmistakable message: Understand me, and get off my back. He was angry in a way I had never seen before. He pounded the table. ‘We are right!’ he said. ‘We had to take the opportunity! And we were successful! History will never forgive us if we don’t do this!’”

Later that same evening, Shultz writes, the mood changed; the next day he learned that Meese had discovered funds from the sale of arms to Iran had been diverted to support the Nicaraguan contra rebels.

Shultz’s description of his meeting with Bush on Nov. 9, 1986, differs from one provided by Bush in a dictated diary recently released in part after being turned over to Walsh’s office. (Excerpts from this Bush diary are published in today’s Outlook section.)

Where Shultz says he told Bush in that tense meeting to recognize they both knew it was arms for hostages, Bush records Shultz advising him, “Don’t get involved in this.”

In mid-December when Shultz was concerned that despite public statements to the contrary, arms for hostages dealings were still underway, they both write of a meeting they had together.

Bush records that he had “a very disturbing conversation with Shultz [on Dec. 14] about bypassing the secretary, his conviction we are still selling arms to Iran even though the president ordered not.” Bush says he called then-acting national security adviser Alton Keel who called Shultz “and worked it all out. There was some misunderstanding apparently, and Shultz backed off after hearing some details from Al [Keel] on the fact that the arms were still going to Iran . . . A very important point,” Bush says without further amplification.

Shultz’s memoirs do not support the suggestion that he “backed off.” Instead he writes that the next day he learned the CIA was ready to continue with the arms-for-hostage program. Shultz went to the White House saying he would report this revived program the next day to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which he did on Dec. 16.

That same morning, Casey collapsed and was taken to the hospital, an event that ended the project for good, according to Shultz.